

DC WASA LEAD OUTREACH INFORMATION PLAN

Introduction

Water authorities need defined communications strategies because as the EPA itself asserts in its *Recommendations for Improving the Washington DC Water and Sewer Authority Lead in Drinking Water Public Education Program* the public education requirements contained within the LCR, while critical are inadequate if not augmented by additional components. Water systems require two distinct yet overlapping communications strategies to guide their public outreach activities if water samples exceed the action triggers defined in the EPA's Lead and Copper Rule (LCR).

First, each water system should have a defined crisis communications plan that is quickly implemented if and when a crisis occurs. Second, water authorities need to employ effective public education and outreach techniques to guide how they will communicate during a protracted period during which the authority is remediating the elevated levels of lead found in homes' drinking water. These plans will ensure a water authority is not only in compliance with the LCR, and that customers and the public are accurately alerted that elevated lead in tap water has triggered additional regulatory obligations. An effective plan will also help inform residents of potential health risks.

This plan is intended to build upon the existing communications efforts of WASA as the Authority (and its partners) moves toward operational solutions to the leaching of lead from lead service lines into some homes' drinking water. Moreover, elements of this plan can and should be utilized to ensure that public communication and education are made more effective across a range of operational and regulatory if other needed system remedies are required in the future.

Actions to Date

The EPA is calling for WASA to enhance its communications efforts in several ways. Specifically, the EPA suggests WASA:

- Hire internal or consultant expertise in the areas of market research and risk communication;
- Conduct an internal communications audit;
- Develop strategic communications plans;
- Include stakeholders to evaluate needs and include them in the decision making process to ensure the proper message is crafted and successfully disseminated to the affected public; and
- Measure the effectiveness of the executed communications plan.

Before launching into our overall plans to enhance our communications, it is important to understand the outreach activities WASA has undertaken to date to educate the

Washington community about elevated lead levels in drinking water in some homes. Examples of significant WASA outreach activities that began in 2003 and continue through 2004 include:

- Sent a brochure to every District address (households and businesses);
- Contacted 14,800 residents to encourage participation in water sampling;
- Sent out 11,000 sample test kits so residents could test levels of their drinking water;
- In conjunction with the Department of Health (DOH), WASA has held 40 community meetings to answer residents' questions about elevated levels of lead in some homes' drinking water;
- Disseminated the most timely information regarding the lead issue at 10 press conferences between the dates of February 5 and May 30 2004;
- Distributed 15 press releases to the daily, local and national press;
- Established in 2003 and expanded in 2004 the WASA Lead Services Hotline to 25 lines;
- Mailed and distributed English and Spanish brochures to libraries, community centers and other organizations;
- Maintained consistent updates on WASA's Web site, which has had more than 500,000 visitors and 10.4 million hits over the last 16 months.

In addition to the actions to date, WASA has undertaken a number of other activities to augment its communication capabilities. Many of these activities parallel the EPA's recommendations. These activities are as follows:

1. Augment existing staff with communication expertise – WASA has recently added three outside consultants to help assess its current communications outreach efforts, recommend avenues for enhancement, and assist the Authority to implement its final communications and outreach plans.

WASA recently has engaged The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Sciences to provide health and technical guidance to WASA in a number of areas including risk communications. GWU School of Public Health is assisting WASA with helping clarify health-related issues, improve communication with their customers, set priorities for mitigating the lead problem, improve the Drinking Water Quality Report, and advise on research-based risk management strategies.

WASA has also contracted with MAYA, a local communications firm with extensive experience in developing grassroots outreach programs for Latino audiences. MAYA will help ensure that WASA's communications and outreach efforts are effectively received by the Spanish-speaking population.

WASA has engaged Edelman, a worldwide communications firm with expertise in strategic public affairs, crisis communications, community outreach as well as specific disciplines in research tracking and measurement. Edelman's role will be to assist the

Authority with all its communication needs from research and plan enhancement to execution and measurement.

Lastly, WASA has also historically utilized the expertise of Beverly Silverberg Communications and Equals 3. Ms. Silverberg is a nationally-known expert in the field of crisis communications and recovery planning. Equals 3 has assisted WASA in developing and producing monthly consumer newsletter and informational brochures.

2. Conduct a communications audit – As part of their duties, Beverly Silverberg Communications conducted a thorough audit of WASA's communications programs. This audit has been a guide WASA has used to implement its communications infrastructure.

3. Develop a communications plan -- The audit mentioned above helped frame the communications plan which WASA currently has in place for both internal and external communications, including the resources and activities dedicated to the lead issue. In fact, the WASA Board of Directors Strategic Plan, updated in October 2003, requires that WAA management annually establish and execute a communications plan. The EPA recommendations and those offered by our consultants will be evaluated and used to augment existing plans.

4. Include stakeholders to evaluate need and include them in decision-making – WASA has used many forums, including community meetings, District of Columbia Council and Congressional hearings, partnerships with community members and local government officials, our website, <http://www.dcwasa.com>, as well as our Lead Hotline to solicit input from those in our community, and recognize the need to rely on stakeholders as a key ingredient throughout our communications. The WASA Board of Directors, comprised of eleven community representatives who are appointed and confirmed by elected representatives, is itself an important mechanism for ensuring stakeholder involvement. Taking into account the unique qualities of District of Columbia and surrounding jurisdictions WASA serves, a community-oriented approach to communications is a top priority for the Authority.

Strategic Approach Moving Forward

WASA is in a unique position regarding its outreach and communications relationship with customers and the Washington, DC community at large. Since the District of Columbia and WASA experienced sustained and very high-profile media attention during a period in which tap water samples have contained high enough elevated levels elevated that the LCR was triggered, it is critical that WASA employ important lessons learned regarding the types of communications that work well in our community and what communications tactics do not.

In 2003 WASA implemented an expansive public outreach initiative elements of which exceeded the requirements in the federal regulations. These initiatives were not sufficient to satisfy the public's interest by two measures. First, communications through our Hotline, community meetings, PSAs, participation on list serves, and other activities did not succeed in reaching a sufficiently wide audience.

Secondly, the frequent, intensive and on occasion misinformed media reports after February 1, 2004 reached more people but may not have, in and of themselves, achieved optimal results with respect to public education and understanding of the Lead and Copper Rule, the exceedance of the Action Level, and appropriate risk communication.

We've learned that merely turning up the volume – with either tone or frequency – in our communications is not sufficient to ensure our messages are understood by the public, nor does this approach necessarily prompt partner agencies to act expeditiously.

We believe a more strategic approach to communications in the Washington, D.C. marketplace is warranted. With that in mind, WASA is assessing agency performance internally with the support of consulting resources, an independent investigation commissioned by the WASA Board of Directors, a Final Report issued by the District of Columbia Interagency Task Force, and other sources. We are using those conclusions as strategic guideposts to augment communications:

- Conduct communications research to more precisely focus tactics and messages
- Develop tools for, and relationships with, intermediary organizations in order to target specific audiences
- Utilize community-based resources to ensure messaging is effectively reaching audiences
- Tailor communications to non-English speaking audiences including and beyond the Latino community
- Improve utilization of regular WASA communications with customers
- Expand Web-based communications

Audiences

This communication plan is written so that vital WASA information reaches the following:

- Residents in Washington, DC
- Residents in metropolitan Washington, DC, as appropriate
- WASA Customers (businesses, homeowners, government)
- Special attention will be made to communicate with special populations, including non-English speaking Washingtonians, tenants and visitors
- Local DC, Fairfax County, Arlington, and Falls Church government officials
- Federal government officials
- Community groups (ANCs, Civic Associations, etc)
- Local media, community, ethnic, and trade press

- Professional associations

Research

WASA strongly believes that both what we say and the channels through which we communicate must be based in quantitative and qualitative research. We do not share the viewpoint that increasing outreach for outreach sake will sufficiently reach our audiences and provide meaningful information they can understand, use and share with others. Therefore, WASA will engage in two specific research projects to:

1) Improve Messaging

In partnership with the George Washington University's Center for Risk Science and Public Health, WASA will conduct a research and demonstration project on the application of "mental modeling" to communication on water quality and lead. Mental modeling is an established technique of enhancing risk communication by determining the cognitive system, information needs and comfort with uncertainty of a target population. The goal is to then provide them with the full range of information they require to arrive at a personally satisfying conclusion, regardless of the opinion of experts. Pioneered at George Washington University, this would be the first major practical demonstration of its efficacy in public communication on water topic. We believe this demonstration offers an important opportunity to address concerns of consumers more directly and effectively, rather than measuring adequacy of communications through the always shifting lense of media reports.

2) Improve Message Vehicles

With assistance of consultant and community resources, WASA will audit and assess communication tactics it has already employed as well as others it hasn't. The purpose of this exercise is two fold: 1) to better determine to what entities members of the Washington, D.C. community go to for important information; and 2) how best to present important information to specifically defined audiences.

Lastly, WASA has recorded hundreds of thousands of customer contacts from our Web site, Lead Services Hotline, e-mail, and dozens of community meeting. We will audit these customer contacts to determine if key communication findings can be applied to this ongoing strategy.

The conclusions of this research project will help us provide a clearer focus on customer and public concerns and questions, as well as the most appropriate presentation (text, graphic, oral, etc..) of various types of information. WASA intends to update its communications strategy to reflect the results of this research.

Outreach Strategies

To reach these various audiences with timely and accurate information, WASA will execute the strategies in a calibrated approach so residents continually receive information from WASA.

A Community Oriented Approach to Communications - Partnerships

WASA believes it is essential to work with different representatives of the community to help ensure WASA is communicating effectively to the diverse members of the Washington, D.C. community.

Therefore, WASA will continue to reach out through its Board of Directors and through other intermediary organizations by providing them with tools that will be useful in sharing information with their constituencies. There exist a multitude of potential community representatives who can participate in this initiative, including a number of entities that we have contacted in the Latino community, members of the faith based community with which WASA has begun to meet, various trade organizations representing hospitals, apartment owners, restaurants and other businesses.

WASA is also working with our partner agencies and institutions to identify a broad based community-oriented organization with expertise and interest in the challenge of improving community understanding of environmental lead exposure. Generally, this partnership is expected to help appropriately tailor information to specific segments of the Washington, D.C. community. It may be particularly helpful in communicating clear and credible information about the actual risks of environmental lead exposure at a time when greater trust in governmental agencies at the local and federal level must be reestablished overtime.

Continue and Expand Outreach to Media

As noted in EPA's Guidance document "radio and television coverage of the lead in the drinking water issue [may be] the best way to get the message delivered to a mass audience at no cost" for a large community water system. With that in mind, our first tactic will be to arrange meetings with area media companies to illicit their support of WASA's outreach efforts. Beyond this initial step, WASA's media outreach efforts will include:

- Conducting background press briefings for local and national media covering this issue;
- Beginning to develop and distribute information to trade and community press on lead issues;
- Expanding appearances on public affairs programs (radio and TV);
- Developing PSAs for radio stations on lead issue and conducting appropriate follow up to encourage radio stations to use PSAs;

- Continuing to issue press releases and hold press conferences to ensure residents receive the latest information regarding lead-in-the-drinking water and are reminded of flushing recommendations;
- Negotiating Web site link arrangements with local media outlets to drive traffic to WASA's website, and also so that if the lead action level is exceeded news organization Websites receive immediate notification and information pertinent to viewers/readers.

Outreach to Community and Ethnic Newspapers

Community and ethnic news outlets are channels of communications WASA will fully utilize going forward. Tactics to maximize exposure will include:

- Develop byline columns for community newspapers and ethnic newspapers;
- Place ads with updated information on lead issue (list of newspapers is attached);
- Develop PSA for foreign language radio stations;
- Enter into Website link arrangements so that if lead action levels are exceeded WASA information is posted in different languages on news sites affected members of the community are likely to browse.

Continue and Expand Community Outreach

While WASA regularly holds or participates in community meetings, our plan for enhancing outreach will include the following:

- In conjunction with the D.C. Department of Health, develop fact sheets for various target audiences;
- Mail and distribute fact sheets and Lead brochure to community and professional organizations to ensure wider distribution;
- Provide flyers/brochures to schools, churches, libraries, businesses, associations, and other government and community locations;
- Schedule meetings with additional organizations and in additional neighborhoods;
- Produce video for Channel 16 and distribution to libraries, other organizations;
- Partner with Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) to disseminate messages;

Increase Outreach to Minority Community

To ensure WASA communications are reaching all local residents, WASA will expand its outreach to minority communities by:

- Developing fact sheets or arranging for community-based organizations to provide translation services for ethnic audiences in foreign languages (Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese and Amharic);

- Working with community intermediaries to ensure material is delivered;
- Holding community meetings with Latino organizations. (This is the largest foreign language group in the District)

Internet and Listserv Outreach Program

For those with Web access especially residents that pay close attention to a neighborhood listserv, the following tactics will ensure WASA messages are heard:

- Provide easy bulleted information for Web site;
- Develop News Center pages for reporters to make it easier for reporters to access general background information for articles;
- Routine review and update website info;
- Send out regular information to neighborhood email listservs.

Direct Communication with Customers

WASA's monthly communication with its customers presents the Authority with an ideal channel of communication (inserts in monthly water bills). WASA will evaluate and implement communication strategies that include scheduled outreach such as:

- Send bi-annual updated information guides and more creative approaches should they prove effective with pertinent information including flushing instructions;

Feedback and Evaluation

Feedback on WASA's communications program is being obtained through comments and feedback at community meetings and from calls and e-mails to the Lead Hotline. Moreover, feedback has also been solicited from the District Council, the EPA, other federal governmental agencies, D.C. Department of Health, community groups and the WASA Board. Much of this feedback has been evaluated and implemented, such as changes to brochures, information for the website, and press releases.

To augment this process even more WASA has formalized and shared status reports that include general information about these communications from customers in the General Manager's Monthly Report to the WASA Board of Directors. If an audit of the information data collected from these various sources proves meaningful, it will also be provided to the Board and the public as we use the data to improve communications activities.

Generally, WASA will work with GWU and consultant resources to determine the most effective and reliable approach to ensuring that WASA captures and uses customer information in its outreach, including the possibility of conducting a survey of customers to determine if the Authority has improved its communications infrastructure and outreach efforts.



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA WATER AND SEWER AUTHORITY

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Community & Ethnic Newspapers

- 1. Afro American**
- 2. Asian Fortune**
- 3. Capital Spotlight**
- 4. Common Denominator**
- 5. DC North**
- 6. East of the River**
- 7. El Pregonero**
- 8. El Tiempo Latino**
- 9. Georgetownner**
- 10. Hill Rag**
- 11. Korean Times**
- 12. NW Current**
- 13. Washington Chinese News**
- 14. Washington Hispanic**
- 15. Washington Informer**
- 16. Washington Post DC Extra**
- 17. Washington Times**